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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000480

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SUBJECT: EXTRAORDINARY SLAVE CASE DEMONSTRATES PERSISTENCE  
OF MASTER-SLAVE MENTALITY IN MAURITANIA

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

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(C) Key Points  
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-- A recent slave case here demonstrates that Mauritians in remote villagers continue to believe in the 21st century that legal master-slave relationships exist. Slavery has been prohibited in Mauritania for decades.

-- In early 2006, a Black Moor "slave" gave cattle worth 500 euros, a very large sum here, to his "master" to buy his freedom. The transaction was even "legalized" in a contract signed between the two and witnessed by the village chief and eight others(!) in the central Mauritanian village.

-- Significantly, both SOS Esclaves and the government agreed on the details of the case, including the fact that the slave believed he was a slave, and the master a master.

-- A nephew of the "slave" soon reported the transaction to the local gendarmerie. To their credit, the gendarmerie immediately launched an investigation, and the "slave master" was forced to return the cattle.

-- In an extraordinary turn, the "freed slave" objected to his nephew's action. According to the nephew, his uncle told him, "the deal has already been made and I am happy...I am free."

-- The "slave master" will not be prosecuted. The prosecutor determined that the "master" was mentally ill and that the transaction was fraudulent, "a case of a swindler taking advantage of a victim," according to a Ministry of Justice official.

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(C) Comments  
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-- We disagree with the prosecutor's description of the case as that of a swindler taking advantage of a victim.

-- Rather, it is an extraordinary case from the remote reaches of the country where at least 11 Mauritians, continued to believe, even in the 21st century, that

master-slave relationships legally exist.

-- The government still has much work to do to get the word out to all Mauritarians in all parts of the country that slavery has been outlawed in Mauritania for decades. That will be an uphill battle in a large Saharan country where illiteracy is rampant and vast regions of the country are still unreachable by any road, paved or unpaved.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (U) On March 28, the local human rights NGO SOS Esclaves (SOS Slaves) publicized the case of Sidi Ould El Mijriya, a Black Moor living in the small village of Daber II in the central Mauritanian province of Tagant. According to SOS Esclaves, Mijriya recently had to buy his freedom from his former master. The details of the story were told to SOS Esclaves by Mijriya's nephew, Ahmed Ould Lagdaf, who claimed that he, too, had been a former slave "through association," because all his family had been slaves or former slaves.

¶2. (U) PolOff Morris talked to Lagdaf, SOS Esclaves' officials, and a representative from the Ministry of Justice during the course of the investigation. Unlike in past slavery investigations, both SOS Esclaves and the government agreed on the details of the case.

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THE DETAILS  
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¶3. (U) According to Lagdaf, his uncle was born a slave to a master named N'Dahid Ould Mohamed Dahid. Mijriya did not work directly for Dahid, nor was he ever physically harmed by

NOUAKCHOTT 00000480 002 OF 003

him. Rather, Mijriya worked as a kind of sharecropper, raising crops and herding cattle, of which Dahid claimed a share as Mijriya's "slave master." "He would come at harvest time and take some of our crops...or take a goat or a sheep whenever he wanted," Lagdaf said.

¶4. (U) In early 2006, Dahid told Mijriya that he could buy his freedom for cattle worth approximately 500 euros. Mijriya, considering himself to be a slave to Dahid, agreed to the proposal. He gave Dahid one heifer, five goats and one billy-goat. The two men, both believing the master-slave relationship to exist, even signed a contract covering the transaction, and the transaction was duly witnessed by the village chief and eight villagers, who, themselves, apparently believed that master-slave relationships were still legal.

¶5. (U) When Lagdaf found out what had happened, he pleaded with his uncle to get the cattle back. "I told him that slavery was abolished and that such a transaction was illegal," Lagdaf said, adding that "I threatened to inform the authorities if he didn't act." According to Lagdaf, Mijriya told him that "the deal has already been made and I am happy...I am free." Mijriya also said that he did not want any trouble with the authorities and that Lagdaf should not "draw attention to this matter."

¶6. (U) Ignoring his uncle's request, Lagdaf went to the local gendarmerie to report what had happened. After receiving mild threats from the gendarmerie that he would be arrested if the case was found to lack merit, they followed Lagdaf to his village. The gendarmerie arrested both Dahid and Mijriya, and held them for 10 days. According to Haimoud Ramdan, an advisor within the Ministry of Justice who sits on the inter-ministerial Anti-TIP Committee, the gendarmerie held the two men to "facilitate their investigation of the claim."

¶7. (U) Following the men's release, the gendarmerie confiscated the contract the two had signed and ordered Dahid

to return the cattle to Mijriya. When asked for a copy of the contract, Ramdan said he did not know where it was or if it had been destroyed.

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THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION  
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¶8. (C) Ramdan said the case was not one of slavery, but "a case of a swindler taking advantage of a victim." However, Ramdan then said that "the public prosecutor decided not pursue the slave master (under the 2003 anti-slavery law) because the slave master was mentally ill and Mijriya had his cattle returned to him and was therefore not hurt by the act." Ramdan said he thought the man would have been prosecuted if he had not been judged to be mentally ill.

¶9. (C) Ramdan added that "the prosecutor has the discretion to decide if the case is one of slavery or not, and how to proceed with each case. In this case the prosecutor decided that because of the slave master's mental illness, and the sensitivity of the slavery issue, that it was better to let the government focus on slavery public awareness, rather than a public prosecution."

¶10. (C) Note: Ramdan used the word "slave master," rather than the man's name, Dahid. While this may have been done intentionally to simplify the case, Ramdan acknowledged that "the slave in this case believed he was a slave, and the slave master believed he was a slave master. End Note.

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SOS ESCLAVES AND LAGDAF'S PERSPECTIVE  
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¶11. (C) Both SOS Esclaves and Lagdaf said that it was a good thing that the gendarmerie had gotten involved and had forced Dahid to return the cattle. "The government has made progress on addressing slavery cases, and we are very pleased with that," SOS Esclaves President Boubacar Messaoud said. Lagdaf echoed this sentiment saying that "slavery is illegal

NOUAKCHOTT 00000480 003 OF 003

and if someone brings a case of slavery to the government they will come in and fix it." He added that "I was born a slave, because my mother and father were slaves...but I am no longer a slave.

¶11. (C) Boubacar was frustrated with the government's decision not to prosecute. "As with all the past cases of slavery we have publicized, the government has done nothing to punish the slave master," he said, adding that "without well-publicized trials of slavery cases and slave masters, slavery will never be destroyed." "We need to send a message to all the slave masters who have not yet been caught," Boubacar concluded.

¶12. (C) Lagdaf, a Haratine (Black Moor) who comes from the village of Daber II in the central province of Tagant, said that the form of slavery that his uncle had just escaped from was very common in his region. "Many people know that slavery was abolished," he said, adding however that "it is still quite common."  
LeBaron